

which captures a historic Baptist emphasis well. I will say more about this in Chapter 7.

The holiness of the church has often been understood ‘positionally’; that is, the church is holy because set apart for God, not because of any particular ethical perfection. This, historically, is a response to the reality of mass Christianity and state churches, and the creation of Christian communities which chose not to police their ethical boundaries with any particular energy. For Baptists, while they would not deny the positional holiness of the church, there is a need for a visible holiness also, which manifests itself in two ways. First, Baptist churches are believers’ churches, requiring a profession of faith in Christ, and a commitment to follow him, of every member. Second, the practice of church discipline maintains the holiness of the church by requiring true repentance of anyone who commits visible sin and excluding the unrepentant. Again, I will have much more to say about this in Chapter 7.

Finally, the catholicity of the church is a claim concerning universality. The church is not limited to a particular culture or locality, but exists in all places. For Baptists, this would be seen as a critique of the practice of state churches, which over-identify with particular cultures. The Christian’s primary loyalty is to the church catholic, not to his or her own community or nation. Roman Catholic accounts of the catholicity of the church have seen a call to mission in this claim: because the church should exist in all cultures and places, there is a need to plant churches in places where they do not currently exist. I am not aware of any Baptist borrowing of this idea, but it would fit well with a Baptist insistence on the missional essence of the local church. I will have more to say about Baptist commitment to a practical catholicity at the end of the next section (on church government).

### Congregational Church Government

In Baptist practice, the local church is governed by the church meeting, when all members gather to seek together the mind of Christ. Church meeting has been a remarkably varied practice through history: formal mechanisms for decision-making vary from a requirement to find consensus through the following of

## The Baptist Vision of the Church

*Robert's Rules* (which codify parliamentary procedure and guide the running of formal meetings of all sorts) to varieties of secret ballot, possibly including postal voting. Agendas vary from a focus on policing the behaviour of members of the church to a concentration on managing the assets of the church, both finance and fabric. Frequency and timing vary widely; historically some churches restricted formal participation to male members only. In some contexts, the church meeting does little more than appoint officers (typically elders and deacons) who then, in practice, run the church. Given all this variation, why do Baptists place such emphasis on the church meeting as a defining part of their identity?

The primary doctrine of the church among Baptists is a stress on the Lordship of Christ. Of course, all Christian denominations will claim this; the Baptist distinctive is applying this resolutely to the local congregation. Polemically, this gives rise to the insistence on the primacy of the local congregation already discussed: anyone, king, magistrate, pope or bishop who seeks to control the local gathered church is, on a classical Baptist understanding, simply and precisely usurping the place of Christ. In terms of positive polity, this teaching raises a question: how is Christ's Lordship experienced or known in the local church? It would be possible to point to a particular congregational leader, or a group of leaders, who are believed to have particular insight into Christ's will for the congregation; Baptists have traditionally resisted this. All the members of the local church are corporately responsible for discerning the mind of Christ for that people. Church meeting, however practised, is the organizational expression of this belief.

Whence the belief? I have noted already that the practice of believers' baptism gives rise to a certain sort of individualism in Baptist ecclesiology. Christ deals directly, or perhaps mediately, through the Holy Spirit, with every particular believer. From this claim it is an easy step to insist that every particular believer in a given fellowship should be involved in the discerning of Christ's call on the fellowship, and so in the governance of the church. In recent years it has been easy to conflate the belief with modern Western individualism, and the practice with democracy,<sup>10</sup> and so to see Baptist polity as merely aping or echoing the culture of the day. Baptist commitments to such positions pre-date contemporary

democratic structures by many decades, however, and more often served as prophetic protests in favour of recognizing the intrinsic worth of every human being, rather than as mirrors of what was current in culture.

The first manual on Baptist church order to commend balloting as good procedure was Charles Stovel's *Hints on the regulation of Christian churches . . .* published in England in 1835; in 1832, the Reform Act had been passed, extending the franchise in England to about 650,000 men, or about 10 per cent of the male population. Stovel thus takes a cultural practice which is available only to a cultural elite of male property owners, and puts it in the hands of all believers, male and female, regardless of their social class or economic situation. This was no passive aping of contemporary political mores; rather it was a profoundly subversive remodelling. (The practice of only allowing male members to vote, known mainly in the second half the seventeenth century in a few British Baptist churches, seems to be an implicit recognition of, and revulsion at, this basic egalitarianism implied in the practice of church meeting.)

The practice of church meeting is not democratic, secondly, because the task of all present is not to express a preference, still less to gain a majority, but to discern together the mind of Christ. The church gathers corporately to seek to hear its Lord's voice and to commit itself to obey what it has heard. Where it is practised, the insistence on finding consensus in church meeting reflects this: church members are called to submit themselves to the will of Christ, not to indicate their own preferences or desires. That said, this consensual practice is fairly rare among Baptists (Quakers and some Anabaptist groups would be more often committed to something like this), perhaps because of a healthy dose of Augustinian realism about the lack of growth in holiness of at least some church members. In this or that area, one or another member may be deaf to the call of Christ, and so a majority is acceptable.

As noted in passing above, some Baptist traditions permit postal or proxy voting by members on key decisions; in straightforwardly democratic terms, the logic of this is impeccable, so much so that resistance to it demands explanation; where it is resisted, it is because of an awareness that the task of church meeting is knowing the mind of Christ, and a sense that this can only be done in the gathered body. Again, Baptist practices, when interrogated, make it clear

## The Baptist Vision of the Church

that the basic impetus is not a belief in democracy, but a belief that it is the corporate responsibility of all to discern the mind of Christ.

This account of the theological importance of the practice of church meeting for Baptists is perhaps most vulnerable to the observation of widely varying agendas across time and tradition. In the British Baptist tradition, for instance, church meetings prior to circa 1800 were almost always focused on policing the Christian conduct of members, whereas by 1900, and down to the present day, agendas will more typically be focused, at least in large part, on financial and fabric issues. Has Christ changed his mind about what matters in his churches?

The answer, of course, is more that the churches have changed their minds about, in some cases what is primary to being church, and in other cases how to fulfil Christ's calling. Almost all British Baptist churches would still take seriously the need to watch over the behaviour of fellow members, but much of the informal encouragement and rebuke that was previously done in church meeting would now be done quietly by those to whom the low-level pastoral tasks of the church have been assigned, typically pastors and elders. (Excommunication is still a matter for the church meeting; in practice, in contemporary Britain, a member is very likely to disassociate him- or herself from the church, and probably to find a welcome in a different local fellowship, long before the point of a formal consideration at church meeting is reached.)

The twentieth-century focus on matters of fabric can perhaps best be read as part of a concern for mission. Around the beginning of the twentieth century many urban and suburban Baptist churches found that mission through a variety, in some cases a plethora, of community organizations – youth clubs, sports clubs, women's meetings and so forth – was effective. The maintenance of such a programme of mission, however, demanded the upkeep of an extensive church plant, and so a degree of focus on fabric matters. (If this analysis is correct, then we might expect to see matters of fabric dropping off church meeting agendas slowly, at least in Britain and America, as the contemporary emphasis on mission among Baptists in those countries is far more of the 'church without walls' variety.)

One final comment about the practice of church meeting is worth making, returning to the catholicity of the church discussed

## Baptist Theology

briefly above. It has sometimes been difficult, operating at the level of doctrinal abstraction, for Baptists to give an account of how their commitment to (a measure of) catholicity works out in their ecclesiology. If each local congregation governs itself, without intervention from the wider church, how can Baptist churches reflect the riches of whatever broader Christian church they recognize (and even in the extreme case of Landmarkist sectarianism, at least other Landmarkist churches are recognized, and so there is some small measure of catholicity to be expressed). The actual practice of church meeting, however, makes a measure of informal but real catholicity obvious, as in the course of their discussions members will bring insights borrowed from other Christians they have read or talked to, from conferences they have attended, from other fellowships they have been part of and so on, as well as perhaps the leadership bringing insight from consulting other fellowships or denominational bodies, and/or those with a measure of formal theological training bringing knowledge from their studies to bear.

### The Independence and Interdependence of Local Churches

This question of practical catholicity of a Baptist church suggests that the next issue to be considered is the interdependence of local churches, or 'associationalism', as it is known in Baptist life. As stated above, the principle of the independence of the local church is the claim that a particular congregation needs nothing beyond itself to be a true church of Christ; that does not mean that it is free to ignore whatever lies beyond the bounds of its own fellowship. Instead, Baptists have, virtually from their foundation, held that true churches have a duty to unite together for support and instruction. The most famous statement of this imperative is unquestionably the founding minute of the Abingdon Association, written in October 1652:

That perticular churches of Christ ought to hold firme communion each with other in point of advice in doubtful matters and controversies . . . because there is the same